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OFFICIAL-INFORMAL

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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS
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(X) Release () Excise () Deny

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Dear Mac:

In the review of our reply to your cable asking about clandestine prisons, it may be helpful for someone in the Department to have some sidelights on the development of this issue. We do not want to initiate a polemic about it and consequently do not want to be quoted. The material is provided to give you perspective.

We are developing some additional information for reply to the Department's inquiry on prisoners. It is not going to be anything near conclusive information, but I expect that our lack of information will demonstrate that we are not in a position to make a protest to the GOA. The issue first became prominent in January of this year. Tex Harris wrote letters of February 22 and 27 to Pat Flood (copies to Brayshaw) which spoke of "the clandestine prisoner issue is the bomb within the Argentine human rights situation" and of a report that he had received of a clandestine facility within the city limits with between 200 and 300 prisoners. These were ultimately supplemented with memcons of February 8 and 21 which dealt with the topic; the latter one reporting the story of a woman released from a clandestine facility who claimed there were 200-300 other prisoners in her facility in mid-January 1979.

If memory serves, we felt that the information in these reports was too skimpy on which to base such sensational

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charges and before dignifying them we tried to get a Country Team assessment of the situation. This resulted in Buenos Aires 3056 of April 18. Pat Flood attended the meeting at which the information was reviewed. All participants were asked to present at that meeting all information they could develop on the topic of clandestine prisoners. Tex's presentation was made from a long spread sheet which was apparently keyed to conversations he had with prisoners or their relatives. The sheet purported to provide evidence on the location of secret prisons, the period of their operation, and sometimes the Service which operated them. In the discussion of each individual report, it would turn out that the report related to something which had happened at least six months previously or in fact did not directly relate to the question of clandestine prison facilities. The only apparently hard report was that contained in the February 21 memcon with the Spanish and Italian Consuls. I learned to my considerable surprise yesterday that Tex never discussed the information in his spread sheet with Bill Hallman, who has not seen it subsequently. We are looking in the POL files to see if it remains in the Embassy. Bill Hallman has checked with the Spanish and Italian Consuls who do not confirm the report of 200-300 prisoners included in the February 21 memcon. Since that information has been forwarded to Washington it has by now acquired the authority of Holy Writ. We are naturally reluctant to impeach one of our own reports, recognizing the furor it will create.

With that for prologue we can go on to the substantive issue. When the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo come in to see the Ambassador they always reiterate their conviction that there are hundreds of unacknowledged prisoners being held at the Campo de Mayo or some unspecified facility. This is a matter of faith with this group and we have never been able to pin down one of their assertions. Ken Sackett after many conversations with prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families, has concluded there are no

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clandestine prisons but observed that his German counterpart believes that there are, apparently because "there simply have to be." There is a large body of opinion in this city, which includes Bob Cox, which shares the German's gut feeling. This feeling is based on no firm evidence so far as we can determine. Our one plausible source, whose report we felt we had to include, speculated that there must be some remaining secret detention facilities and that not all those in these facilities would be surfaced. When we reported this in Buenos Aires 6150 we frankly blew it, as the Ambassador is not reluctant to remind me. Bill interviewed the source at great length yesterday and has pieced together a far less dramatic and more plausible tale that suggests there may be up to several dozen prisoners in various parts of the country who are not acknowledged. Our problem with this source is that he is a Government plant and we cannot account for his casually providing us damning information against his employer when we know he is often used as a conduit for information the Army wishes us to hear.

We have discounted the reports of the Mothers since they have never been able to provide us with information to confirm their suspicions (or hopes) and we have almost without exception been unsuccessful in our attempts to pin down other reports of clandestine prisons. We felt we had to include a reference to the report from our Government source simply because it cannot be totally rejected no matter how suspicious we are about it. We erred badly in not qualifying this report sufficiently and it may turn out that we erred in not rectifying Tex's report of the information received from the Spanish and Italian Consuls (although this is not yet totally pinned down). On the other hand it is an inevitable consequence of our having to report whatever we hear even when we have no basis whatsoever for evaluating the information. My current betting is that the elements of the Country Team will be unable to come up with a single suspected clandestine prisoner facility, but at the same time we will be unable to disprove the vague assertions that they exist. The information which we

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have assembled so far is vastly short of what would justify any demarche by the Ambassador to General Viola.

At lunch today Ricardo Yofre expressed some real anxiety about the effect of the IAHRC visit upon military politics. He flatly predicted that Videla will be replaced at the end of this year and says that the identity of his successor -- whom he expects to be Viola -- will be much influenced by the way the various political factors play the Commission's visit. If the final military perception is that the visit has been a bad error it will mean